

# UiA PRIFORSK Evaluation Form

## (for external referees)

### Assessment guidelines:

The research centre to be reviewed has been a Priority Research Centre (PRIFORSK) at the University of Agder since 2019. From 2019 until the end of 2023, the research centre has been receiving strategic funding from the university in order to further develop and strengthen quality of the centre's research and the centre's national and international impact. The purpose of the current evaluation is to critically assess the centre's achievements in this period, its current level, and the centre's future potential. The assessment will be used as guidance for the university management's decision on whether to extend its funding support to the centre for an additional period of three years.

The assessment is to be done based on the research centre's evaluation report (including attachments) provided to you. Please note that chapter 2 of the evaluation report is a self-evaluation by the centre and is not formally a part of your assessment assignment. However, you may refer to chapter 2 to gain insight into the research centre and to inform the assessments you are asked to do.

All assessments should be written. Marks are not to be used. The minimum amount of words that should be used are specified in the comments section below for each evaluation criteria. Additional information and guidelines for each evaluation criteria are also provided below.

### 1. Overall assessment

**Based on your reading of the evaluation report, the overall assessment should comment on, but is not limited to:**

- Overall impression of the centre's contribution to strengthen and increase research quality and research capacity in the period of evaluation (2019-mid 2023)
- Overall impression of the centre's research quality and competitiveness at an international level as of mid 2023
- Overall impression of the centre's organization and management

*Comments: Please address all the above bullet points as a minimum (min 500 words)*

*Overall impression of the centre's contribution to strengthen and increase research quality and research capacity in the period of evaluation (2019-mid 2023)*

The Centre for Lifecourse Nutrition set some challenging targets at the beginning of the PRIFORSK funding. These included 4 ambition areas that provided a clear focus for the research challenges to be addressed. Ambition 1 was aimed at creating new understanding of the influential dietary factors in a lifecourse perspective. Ambition 2 addressed generating evidence on effective interventions. Ambition 3 focused on translating the generated knowledge into practice by building up capacity through education and the fourth ambition was to address policy guidance. In all these areas the Centre has made significant progress and contributed to advancing the related fields. Publications from this period have been extensive and in high quality international journals with over 412 citations which is a testament to the relevance and quality of the research conducted, much of which has provided entirely new insights into dietary research and practice. As well as producing numerous timely and high-quality publications, the Centre has clearly increased in capacity through almost doubling the research staff and PhDs at the Centre. There has been a

focus on achieving gender balance which has resulted in more male researchers at the Centre. It is notable that Centre has achieved or exceeded all the KPIs that were possible to be achieved and the only ones that were not were due to Covid or faculty decisions outside their direct control. Even those not achieved to date seem on target to be achieved shortly.

**In sum, the Centre put the PRIFORSK status and funding to extremely good use and developed the Centre's capacity whilst delivering high quality research that is both relevant and timely.**

Overall impression of the centre's research quality and competitiveness at an international level as of mid 2023

The Centre's publications have been in international journals and 16% of the 74 have been in Tier 2 publications with 57% being in Q1 ranked journals. The Centre has active collaborations in Sweden and several applications for Horizon Europe and Erasmus funding programmes. Although the specific number of international collaborators are not stated in the evaluation report, various publications have clearly raised international media attention. Although it is mentioned in the report that participation at international conferences was a target, it has not been explained in more detail about how many papers were published at these venues or what conferences specifically.

**Despite these missing details I have little doubt that the research produced by the Centre is highly internationally competitive.**

Overall impression of the centre's organization and management

The organisational structure is very clear and streamlined. It is well organised with a clear hierarchy for responsibility and decision making. One leader, one deputy and one researcher in charge of each of the 9 research areas. Appropriate support is provided through a scientific advisory board and connectivity to end users is assured through and end user advisory board. There is good attention to team and culture building within the Centre and I feel this strong organisational and management structure is highly conducive to team building and quality of research. It is also very beneficial that the team are located at the one site which facilitates the communication and team building aspects of the Centre. There is a good focus on career development from the senior team members. Perhaps meeting more often than once per year for formal strategy meetings could be undertaken more frequently.

**Other than this minor point, the organisational structure and management are well established, appropriate and seemingly very effective at getting the best out of the Centre staff.**

## **2. External funding**

Please refer to chapter 5. External funding and assessments of submitted proposals (attached)

The assessment should comment on, but is not limited to:

- The centre's *efforts* to obtain external funding
- The centre's *ability* to obtain external funding
- Overall impression of the quality of research proposals submitted by the centre (please refer to the attached assessments of submitted proposals)

Comments: Please address all the above bullet points as a minimum (min 250 words)

The centre's efforts to obtain external funding

The Centre has been very active in applying for external research funding with 42 applications over the last 4 years. Various funding agencies have been applied to including Horizon Europe. Over 50% of the applications are coordinated by Centre staff which is a positive and demonstrates the creativity and conceptual thinking strengths at the Centre. A slight concern exists however, in that as the capacity of the Centre has increased in terms of doubling the staff, this is not reflected in an increase in the applications submitted. These remained static for the first three years at between 10 and 12 applications per year but dropped significantly to just 5 in 2022.

**It is clear that recent efforts for applying for external funding have dropped in intensity in the last year and as such more attention is needed to maintain and increase the applications as well as more focus on European funding where nutrition and diet are important research topics.**

#### The centre's ability to obtain external funding

Out of the 37 applications for external funding made 10 have been awarded which represents a good success rate of 27%. It is also worth noting that the two largest awards were for applications coordinated by the Centre. Overall, 53 million NOK have been secured from external funding agencies. There is currently a lack of success with Horizon Europe grants and, so far, no one at the Centre has coordinated an application to the Horizon Europe programme either.

**Whilst the Centre has demonstrated the ability to obtain external funding one of the largest sources of funding internationally (HE) is not being utilised at present.**

#### Overall impression of the quality of research proposals submitted by the centre

On the one hand the senior staff's proposals that have been funded are clearly of good quality one notably scoring 7, 7 and 7, but on the other hand the proposals that have failed seem to be scoring 3, 4 or 5 for excellence.

**Whilst the evaluators recognise the importance and timeliness of the proposed research the overall level of detail and clarity of the proposals sometimes are lacking. This may in part be due to poor proposal writing skills rather than a fundamental flaw in the scientific direction.**

### **3. Future potential**

**Based on your reading of the evaluation report, the overall assessment should comment on, but is not limited to:**

- Overall impression of the centre's future potential, with particular emphasis on potential for successfully competing for SFI and/or SFF funding within the next three years (2024-2026)
- Significant shortcomings, if any, in the centre's track record and/or capacity that would need to be addressed to successfully compete for SFI and/or SFF funding.

Comments: Please address all the above bullet points as a minimum (min 500 words)

#### Overall impression of the centre's future potential, with particular emphasis on potential for successfully competing for SFI and/or SFF funding within the next three years (2024-2026)

The Centre has made excellent progress since 2019. The number of staff has increased the quality and visibility of the research has increased and is clearly internationally competitive. The teaching has aimed to integrate new research findings into the curricula at the Centre and the organisational structure and culture being created are all highly in line with the expectations of the SFF and SFI programmes. I am also very impressed with the strategic plans presented for the Centre moving beyond 2022 and particularly with the Urban Lab concept. The Centre has a clear and exciting vision for the future and this is also something

valued by the SFF and SFI programmes. I feel that the topic of addressing diet-mental health associations and dietary factors important for child development, quality of life and children's educational achievement is highly engaging and exciting field. What also stands out is the clear intention to achieve a real impact from the results by integrating well with end-user stakeholders to ensure their awareness and active involvement in the Centre and its findings.

**I have little doubt that the Centre for Lifecourse Nutrition will be able to present a very competitive and exciting application to either the SFF or the SFI programme as soon as the call is announced. It is well organised, visionary and has excellent leadership.**

*Significant shortcomings, if any, in the centre's track record and/or capacity that would need to be addressed to successfully compete for SFI and/or SFF funding*

I do not feel there are any significant shortcomings that prevent the Centre being competitive in a bid for SFF or SFI funding. However, there are a number of aspects to address to ensure a better functioning of the Centre. Firstly, the attention on applications needs to be refocused to ensure that application numbers grow in line with staff additions and junior staff need to be encouraged and supported more to ensure the quality of their applications benefit from better proposal writing craft. Secondly, a more committed engagement with the Horizon Europe programme would be beneficial for international visibility and opportunities for additional external funding and international networking. The international perspectives of the Centre at present do not seem well focused and this could be enhanced for the benefit of the centres research and future recruitment prospects.

**There are no significant shortcomings that would prevent a successful application directly.**